

Assistant Secretary Linda Thomas-Greenfield's Remarks
YALI Mandela Washington Fellow Summit
Omni Shoreham Hotel, Regency Ballroom, 2500 Calvert Street NW
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Good afternoon, everyone! It is truly an honor to be here today to speak to you as you round out what I know has been an extraordinary rich experience in your respective universities across the United States. I know that you have had an exciting week so far and I suspect your excitement will peak later this afternoon, not by my speaking, but who comes after me.

It is really amazing to see almost 1,000 of you here today – double the number we had last year. I'm thrilled by the growth in this program and I congratulate all of you for being selected to what you know was an extremely competitive program.

I've had the privilege of meeting some of you in advance of today. I met the Liberian cohort in May. Where are you, Liberians? When I was visiting Liberia, they had just been selected. I also met this year's cohort from Howard University. Are you here in the room? And I apologize to those of you who were at Madison, Wisconsin. I was supposed to meet all of you. And I welcome every single one of you here today. On Monday night I had the opportunity to meet the 50 entrepreneurs who received grants from the African Development Foundation and I want to congratulate all of you for your success.

When people ask me what is the most important initiative that the U.S. government under the Obama administration has in Africa and what will be the Obama legacy in Africa – and everyone has a different answer to that question, but I have one – YALI. I point to YALI for many reasons. But the most important one is all of you and what all of you bring to the program – your talent, your passion, and your potential.

You have heard this before but I will say it again: you are Africa's future, and you inspire all of us every day by your enthusiasm, by your ambitions, and by your creativity. You are the reason, in the face of so many challenges, that we all continue to strive to make Africa better.

Empowering young people is at the heart of U.S.-Africa relations. Our mission is to partner with Africa to promote democracy, peace, prosperity, and opportunity. And we believe those goals intertwined in everything we do.

As we work toward these goals, I can think of no better partner than all of you – the Mandela Washington Fellows. You have already made a big difference through the work you have done in your home countries – and that's why you were all chosen for this program. And it is our hope that this program helps you to make an even bigger impact in your country.

When President Obama addressed the African Union in Ethiopia last year, he said, "The most urgent task facing Africa today and for decades ahead is to create opportunity for the next generation." 70 percent of Africans are under the age of 25. It's a youthful continent. We have to ensure that youth like yourselves are engaged in your communities and you are vested in the future of your countries - that's a central goal of YALI.

You are the change agents of the future and you will need to take the skills and ambitions you have to encourage other young people, because you are just a drop in the bucket. So we need you to be change agents; to be that one drop of red paint in the bucket of white that will taint the whole bucket to infect all African youth with the enthusiasm and dreams that you have. Your ambitions will have to encourage other young people who do not have the advantages that you have. They need you to invest in them the way we have invested in you.

We also have to ensure that women are fully engaged in their communities and contributing to their country's growth in all areas. I'm really thrilled to say that half of the Mandela Washington Fellows in this room are women. Nothing against you guys, now. It was one of your colleagues on the first day, who said that women must lean in – they must lean in completely. This is your time, she said, let's own it. We know African countries cannot succeed if they leave half of their population out of the mix. So I encourage you women out there to let your voices be heard. And I encourage you men to listen. I encourage you to listen to the voices of these women, because they are your partners.

As you all think about your future back home, after you return - and I know that you are anxious to get back home to your families, and to your traditional foods, and your own cultures – I want you to consider a famous quote by President John F. Kennedy and you have all heard it before – “ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” Let me hear you all say it – “ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” Do you know that this quote was made 55 years ago? And it still inspires all of us today. It still resonates with us and it continues to be relevant regardless of who we are and what country we are from.

For those of you not staying on for the internship program this summer, let me just state, this is the beginning – the beginning of a long-term commitment to being a force for good. And it is the beginning of the next chapter of your lives back in your home countries, where you will be not asking what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.

The responsibility of being a Mandela Washington Fellow carries with it a huge burden to succeed. I know about that burden coming from a segregated background, where you can't fail. I'm putting the burden on you. You cannot fail. Your burden is to succeed. It also means that you have to choose the high road. You have to choose what is right as you move forward. That responsibility extends to serving as role models for the youth of your country, sharing your experiences with them, and sharing your skills and expertise to create a multiplier effect across the region.

And let me be clear, Africa has undeniable challenges in terms of good governance, rule of law, and citizen empowerment. One of the speakers on the first day said all we hear about is the bad news of Africa. We need to do more to hear about the good news. And certainly, you are about that good news. But we cannot ignore the bad news, because you live it every single day. When the YALI Fellows were here in 2014, we were all engrossed about the impact of Ebola in West Africa. In 2015, it was the crisis in Burundi that is still slowly burning.

Today, South Sudan is very much on our minds as those brave and strong people continue to suffer from the threat of renewed fighting. I know we have 15 South Sudanese Fellows in this room right now. I want to tell them -- to tell you -- that the United States is dedicated to working

with the international community to find a peaceful solution and a way forward for the people of South Sudan. So I ask all of you to stay connected with our brothers and sisters from South Sudan. Pray for their courage and their strength to face the challenges that confront them and their families over the next few years.

But let's face it. While we remain involved, ultimately the leadership and the people of South Sudan will determine its fate. And that is true across the continent of Africa. Your families and friends and fellow citizens deserve stability and they deserve the opportunity to live their lives with dignity, free from fear and turmoil.

You, the 2016 Mandela Washington Fellows, were selected because of your talent; you were selected because of your potential; and you were selected because of your commitment to public service. Because you are blessed with special gifts – please don't ignore that. Because of those special gifts, you have special responsibilities. And in my view, that responsibility is to build a better future for your country and for Africa.

I know no country is perfect, including my own. You have been here during an incredible time in the U.S. You have witnessed polarizing times in the United States this summer. I'm referring to the issue of well-publicized and tragic police killings of African-American men, and the tragic killings of dedicated police officers. Americans have different views on these tragedies, and different perceptions and assumptions that align with race.

I experience this issue personally. I have a son – of course he is black. I have a nephew, who is a police officer. Both are young black men who I worry about every single day. But I can tell you this because I think it is important for you to understand that all people continue to struggle. To build a more perfect union, we have to continue to work together. And that more perfect union, we are all working in the United States to build. And I think it was important for you to see that we are not a perfect society, but we work constantly to pursue perfection. We work constantly to address issues. And we have confidence in the future of our own country.

Martin Luther King once said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Sometimes it seems like it is not bending quickly enough, but let me be clear – it is bending. And through YALI, through this fellowship, I hope we can continue to understand each other's struggles and make sure that we all have better futures together. I am totally confident that we will achieve this in the United States and on the continent of Africa because of young people like yourselves, both in the U.S. and in Africa.

Today I also want to note that in this midst of celebration, there is a pale of mourning in this room – mourning of a loss. And I would like to take a moment to reflect on the life of John Paul Usman, a Fellow from Nigeria, whom we lost in a tragic accident this summer. And I want to offer our condolences to John Paul's family, friends, and to the YALI family. John Paul's promise and leadership brought him here with you this summer, and it is our sincere hope that those of you who knew John Paul will carry forward his aspirations of peace and gender equality as you return to your communities. Although John Paul is no longer here with us today, we know that he will live forever as a Mandela Washington Fellow.

Finally, as you think about your futures, I want to offer four pieces of advice to add to what I know are your already full notebooks:

Number 1: Stay connected. Stay connected with each other and serve as each other's mentors, sounding boards, and more importantly, as each other's support. Senator Coons said that to you on Monday. He encouraged all of you to stay connected when he spoke.

YALI erases borders. We have 49 countries here today, and I see no borders between you. With modern technology such as WhatsApp – the 2015 YALI Fellows taught me WhatsApp when I was visiting South Africa – you can share ideas, seek advice, and commiserate with each other. And also, you can mentor each other, you can inspire each other, you can provide inspiration to each other. You are each other's brain trust. So let me repeat: Stay in touch, offer advice, and help each other succeed.

Number 2: Stay in touch with us. Stay in touch with your universities you attended and the amazing staff and professors who guided you through this program.

And we hope that your relationship with us is just beginning. I encourage you to participate in embassy programs when you return home. Maintain contact with the YALI Network and our Regional Leadership Centers. Take advantage of all of the professional development opportunities that you have. This is, I think, the lasting value for you of YALI.

Number 3: Work on 'closing the gap.'

I always write down notes when I talk to people if something resonates with me. And I recently met a young woman who serves on the High Court of Uganda. She spoke about the need to 'close the gap' between men and women. And we talked a little bit about that. But [...]this applies to all sectors of society. The gap between the haves and the have nots is way too big. The gap between the educated and those who are not educated is way too big. The gap between those who have the advantages of YALI and those who don't is way too big.

So I ask you to close the gap. We need youth leaders like yourselves to close all of these gaps. In many cases, it is as simple as extending a helping hand to one person. That hand might actually be the hand that will make a difference to that person's future.

Number 4: Lastly, and most importantly, I want to urge all of you to dream big.

Liberia's President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf once said at a Harvard University graduation speech, "The size of your dreams must always exceed your current capacity to achieve them. If your dreams do not scare you, they are not big enough."

You all have incredible potential – do not limit yourselves. And remember that you are already leaders. YALI did not create you as leaders. We found you as leaders. The goal of YALI is to give you the tools to be even better, greater leaders than you might have been otherwise. So let me tell you – dream big.

Let me conclude:

Every single one of you in this room – you are going to change lives. You are going to change the trajectory of Africa and the world. I am as confident of that as I am standing here with you today.

I want to congratulate all of you for what you have achieved thus far, and I want to congratulate you in advance for what you will achieve in the future. I look forward to meeting all of you when I'm traveling around Africa. I always ask to see the YALI Fellows. I actually have every single one of your email addresses. You may not have mine, but I have yours. And you will hear from me as I get ready to go to a particular country. I might just pick one YALI Fellow from the cohort from your country and say I'm coming, can you organize to make sure we have an opportunity to see each other.

And the reason I do that is because you inspire me. I know that dealing with all the crises we have to deal with, the difficulties of everyday life, dealing with war and peace on the continent of Africa, it would be hard for me to keep going if I did not have the inspiration that you provide to me and my colleagues every single day.

So, let me end. Go forth and do great things! Thank you.